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### Cultivating student-staff partnerships through research and practice

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### **Editorial: Cultivating student-staff partnerships through research and practice**

Student engagement is a central theme in higher education around the world. Over the last several years, student-staff partnerships have increasingly been portrayed as a primary path towards engagement. Indeed, Healey, Flint, and Harrington argue that “engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century” (2014, p. 7). This special issue explores practices and research on student-staff partnerships, and considers the implications for academic development.

In higher education, partnerships between students and academic staff in learning and teaching can be understood as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014, p. 6-7). Partnership practices vary widely across disciplines, institutions, and countries. This special issue reflects that diversity with articles from Australia, Canada, Sweden, the UK, and the United States. These articles highlight that partnership is an emergent practice that is often unfamiliar to students, staff, and academic developers (Bovill, 2014) – and that partnership does not always fit easily within existing cultures in higher education. A common theme throughout this special issue is the difficulty of moving partnership from theory to practice.

In the first article, Marquis and colleagues evaluate a student scholars programme at McMaster University in Canada. The authors, including both students and staff, use the theoretical lens of threshold concepts to consider the troublesome nature of partnerships for all involved. This article is refreshingly honest about some of the challenges faced in this work, including when staff attempt to make space for student perspectives yet paradoxically leave students feeling less capable of contributing to the partnership.

Woolmer, with student and staff colleagues at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, critically analyze their experiences when co-creating an undergraduate course that spanned a range of science disciplines. They emphasize the importance of beginning partnerships by explicitly addressing the aims and intended processes of the work. At the same time, they stress that too much early attention to structure can stifle the development of authentic partnership.

Bergmark and Westman, scholars in teacher education at the University of Luleå in Sweden, extend this consideration of processes by emphasizing the democratic values at the heart of partnerships. In common with other authors in this issue, they carefully consider some of the tensions in trying to encourage students to take on more responsibility for co-design when students report that it is “hard to give concrete suggestions on tasks when you have little knowledge about the subject”.

Jensen and Bennett at the University of Huddersfield in England outline an interdisciplinary study of their student-staff partnership programme focused on enhancing dialogue about learning and teaching through observation of teaching sessions. The most successful of these partnerships, Jensen and Bennett conclude, “created space for conversation and collaboration, a liminal space where students and staff stepped outside normal roles and the traditional learner-teacher relationship”.

Extending this attention to different roles and spaces, Peseta, along with students and staff from the University of Sydney, Australia, analyze a student ambassadors' scheme focused on assessment and on the University's Learning and Teaching Conference. They highlight the complex context within which partnership is occurring, and they raise important questions about how this work might simultaneously, and ironically, enact both social justice pedagogies and neoliberal educational practices.

The final article, by Curran and Millard, explores partnership projects with similar goals and origins at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, and Birmingham City University, England. Curran and Millard stress the role of the academic developer and also Student Unions in supporting partnerships at an institutional level, and they offer practical guidance for academic developers who seek to cultivate partnerships.

A short reflection essay by Barrineau and colleagues at Uppsala University in Sweden draws on experiences in the first and largest partnership project in Swedish higher education. The authors emphasize the ways this work complicates familiar roles for students, staff, and academic developers.

The special issue concludes with brief book reviews of three recent publications that are cited frequently in these articles. Bryson reviews Healey, Flint, and Harrington, *Engagement through partnership* (2014). Verwoord reviews Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching* (2014). Brown reviews Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew, and Millard, *Student engagement* (2013).

The papers in this issue suggest that partnership practices have four particularly salient implications for academic developers:

1. **Supporting staff and student partnerships:** As an emerging practice in higher education, partnership is unfamiliar territory for students, staff, and institutions. The language of threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003) echoes throughout this special issue in references to liminality and troublesome knowledge. Academic developers have the opportunity and the responsibility to advise and support people and institutions in navigating new roles and creating new spaces to make partnerships strong and sustainable.
2. **Developing research and theory on partnerships:** The recent interest in partnership practices in higher education leaves considerable space for research and theorizing about this approach to learning, teaching, and academic development. The papers in this special issue are all small-scale studies and often include an element of self-research. These qualitative methods are appropriate, and contextualized analysis of practice has scholarly merit. However, larger scale quantitative or multi-institutional studies would also contribute to our emerging understanding of effective practices and possible outcomes of partnerships for students, staff, institutions, and academic development.

3. **Creating inclusive and equitable partnerships:** As partnership becomes a more common practice in higher education, academic developers should work to ensure that individuals and institutions are creating equitable and inclusive structures (Cook-Sather & Agu 2013; Felten et al. 2013; Bovill et al. 2015). Peseta and colleagues explain starkly the perils of not attending to these issues, since partnership practices can be employed toward a range of ends that may or may not reflect the democratic and egalitarian purposes of higher education.
4. **Cultivating partnerships in academic development:** Increasing attention to student-staff partnerships should prompt academic developers to promote new practices and theories in our field. Like students and staff, many academic developers may experience partnership approaches as a threshold concept that can be both troublesome and transformative (Werder, Thibou, & Kaufer, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2014). To extend these explorations beyond this special issue, in *IJAD*'s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue (21:4, December 2016) Cook-Sather will offer a reframing of academic staff induction processes to include students as partners in learning and teaching. This is an essential shift if partnership is to become a central practice of university teachers rather than a niche pursuit.

We hope you find the contents of this issue inspiring and provocative. Whatever your level of experience with this approach, we encourage you to read these papers and to critically reflect upon your own role as an academic developer in initiating, supporting, sustaining, and extending student-staff partnerships to enhance learning and teaching for all in higher education.

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